

# A Survey on the Descriptions of the Subjunctive Mood in the Revised Textbooks for Senior High Schools

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# A Survey on the Descriptions of the Subjunctive Mood in the Revised Textbooks for Senior High Schools

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**Abstract:** The subjunctive mood is said to be one of the most difficult grammatical structures to acquire for Japanese learners; and one of the main factors making it difficult is the tense form. This paper clarifies three major points regarding the tense form that make this item hard to acquire, and reports how these points are dealt with in the MEXT-censored textbooks revised in 2012 and 2013. The results of the survey show that these points are not discussed enough in most textbooks.

The subjunctive mood will remain difficult unless the instructors supplement those textbooks. This paper proposes that the points to be supplemented are (1) tense form control as the key to expressing something unreal, (2) six forms of clauses to present to the learners, and (3) the rule of "agreement of tense" not always applied.

**Keywords:** tense, past form, subjunctive past, subjunctive past perfect, agreement of tenses

## 1. Introduction

It is generally agreed that the subjunctive mood is one of the most difficult grammatical items for Japanese learners to acquire (Kido [2], Nagai [6], Itou [1], Nomura [7], Gotou [3], and many more). Itou [1] carried out a historical study on how this grammatical structure has been interpreted and described in various grammar books and textbooks, and he shows that one of the main factors making this structure difficult is understanding the tense form, which creates gaps between forms and meanings.

This paper (1) clarifies three major points that make this item hard to acquire and that, therefore, the learners should be made aware of, (2) reports the results of the survey on how these three points are treated (if they are) in the MEXT-censored senior high school textbooks: English Communication I revised in 2012 and English Communication II revised in 2013, covering all the 25 titles, and (3) proposes what the instructors should do in order to supplement those textbooks.

## 2. What are the problematic points regarding the tense?

This paper claims that the three points that make it hard to acquire the subjunctive mood are (1) the past forms, especially those of auxiliary verbs, do not always express the past tense, (2) the grammatical terms used for example sentences of the subjunctive mood are based on the forms in the subordinate clauses and not on the main clauses, and (3) the very famous rule of the "agreement of tenses" does not

always apply to this grammatical item. Let us examine how each of them can be confusing for learners in the following sections.

### 2.1 Past forms that do not refer to the past

All the textbooks (at least before the revisions in 2012 and 2013) stated that the "subjunctive past" requires the past form in the "If—" clause and an auxiliary verb such as *would* and *could* plus the infinitive form of a verb in the main clause, as in Ex.1.

Ex.1: If the story were true, I would be happy.

However, very few textbooks clearly stated that these past forms do not express the past event. Also, *would* and *could* are the past forms of *will* and *can* respectively, but such explanation was very rare. Learners were merely provided with the basic patterns of the forms. Likewise, those books stated that the "subjunctive past perfect" requires the past perfect form in the "If—" clause and an auxiliary verb such as *would* and *could* plus the perfect form of a verb in the main clause, as in Ex.2.

Ex.2: If John had taken your advice, he would have succeeded in the project.

The learners were not clearly made aware that the past perfect forms do not always express the past perfect events. It was natural that the learners had difficulty using these forms appropriately if they were not clearly aware that there are gaps between the forms and meanings.

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## 2.2 Grammatical terms based on the form of the subordinate clause

As stated in Section 2.1, the term “subjunctive past” refers to sentences with the past form in the “If –” clause and an auxiliary verb plus the infinitive form of a verb in the main clause, and the “subjunctive past perfect” refers to sentences with the past perfect form in the “If –” clause and an auxiliary verb plus the perfect form of a verb in the main clause. Then, what should sentences like Ex.3 be called?

Ex.3: If John had taken a taxi, he would be here now.

The “If –” clause has the form of the “subjunctive past perfect” and the main clause, the “subjunctive past.” It was hard for learners to understand the sentences with this “mixture” if they were not aware that the grammatical terms of the “subjunctive past/past perfect” are based on the subordinate clause only. We can find a past form in the main clause in Ex.1, because *would* is the past form of *will*. However, we cannot find a past perfect form in the main clause in Ex.2. Therefore we cannot say that these two grammatical terms cover the main clauses. If the learners are not clearly aware of this fact, it is hard to choose the appropriate forms, especially when a “mixed” pattern is required.

## 2.3 Cases where the “agreement of tenses” is not applied

There is a famous grammatical rule called the “agreement of tenses” in the indicative mood. It means that the form of the predicate verb in the subordinate clause depends on that of the main clause in order to maintain consistency in time. See the following two example pairs.

Ex.4: (a) John says that he is happy.  
(b) John said that he was happy.

In this pair, the times of *saying* and *being* happy are the same. In order to express it, we need to change *is* into *was* if *says* is changed into *said*.

Ex.5: (a) John says that he was happy.  
(b) John said that he had been happy.

In this pair, the times of *being* happy precede that of *saying*. Therefore, in order to express “the past in the past,”

we need to use the past perfect form in (b). What about the cases in the subjunctive mood, then? Let us examine the following pair.

Ex.6: (a) I wish I were the President.  
(b) I wished I were the President.

Whether the time of *wishing* is in the present or in the past, the same form is used for *being* the President. In other words, even if *wish* is changed into *wished*, *were* remains the same. This means that the rule of agreement of tenses is NOT applied here. If learners are not clearly aware of this fact, they tend to make sentences like Ex. 7 when actually Ex. 6 (b) is appropriate.

Ex.7: I wished I had been the President.

Only when the time of *being* the President precedes that of *wishing* (wishing being the ex-President), we use the past perfect. The same thing happens in “as if - ” clauses, as in Ex. 8.

Ex. 8: (a) John acts as if he were the President.  
(b) John acted as if he were the President.  
(c) John acted as ifhe had been the President.

(a) and (b) refer to John acting very much like the incumbent President, whereas (c) refers to John acting very much like the ex-President. These differences from the indicative mood are confusing for learners and it is natural that they have difficulty in using sentences in the subjunctive mood appropriately.

## 3. The Survey: How are the Three Major Points Dealt with in the Revised MEXT-Censored Textbooks?

There are twenty-five titles of Communication English I and II by thirteen publishers in all. In this study, all of them were examined and checked to see if there were any references to the above-mentioned points that make the subjunctive mood difficult. The results are shown in Table 1. Points A, B, and C in the table correspond to the problems in 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 (Key words provided below). The problem in 2.2 is about the term based on the subordinate clause and mixture of different patterns in the two clauses. There was one textbook that had no reference to the subordinate clause but mentioned the mixture of patterns. This case is described as “B-2” in the table.

**Table 1.** Number of the titles of the textbooks that have any reference to the problems

	A	B	B-2	C
	(Past form)	(Subordinate clause)	(Mixture)	(Agreement)
Communication English I	3	1	1	0
Communication English II	0	0	0	1

As we can see, only three titles out of the twenty-five refer to point A, and only one title refers to points B, B-2, and C respectively. In most textbooks, the description of the subjunctive mood is only about the basic patterns: the tense form in each clause, and understanding the problems of the tense as a key to the difficulty is untouched.

#### 4. Conclusion

The subjunctive mood, which is generally known as one of the most difficult grammatical items for Japanese learners to acquire, will naturally remain difficult even after the recent revisions unless instructors supplement those textbooks. The following are the proposals for supplementing.

##### 4.1 Tense form control as the key to expressing something unreal

The very first thing that the learners should understand and remember is that there can be a gap between the tense form and its meaning. That is to say, we can control the tense form in order to express certain meanings. It is not peculiar to the subjunctive mood. Instructors can use some other examples of the gaps, for example, that the past form *could* in "Could you - ?" does not refer to the past. They can explain that the gap in this case expresses politeness, and the one in the subjunctive mood expresses something unreal.

##### 4.2 Six forms of clauses to present to the learners

We tend to take it for granted that there are two basic forms of the subjunctive mood, and use the terms the "subjunctive past/past perfect." However, as pointed out before, the main clause of the subjunctive past perfect does not include the past perfect form. So, the learners can not actually depend on these terms in understanding and using this mood. Actually, we do not need to use them.

An alternative way is to present (A) four types for "If - "

complex sentences (clause by clause), and (B) two types for "wish - " and "as if - " sentences.

For "If - " complex sentences, we can present the following four clause patterns and give the learners exercises to combine them according to certain meanings.

(A)-1: "If - " clause expressing something in the present includes the past form of a verb (or an auxiliary verb).

(A)-2: "If - " clause expressing something in the past includes the past perfect form of a verb.

(A)-3: The main clause expressing something in the present includes the past form of an auxiliary verb plus the infinitive form of a verb.

(A)-4: The main clause expressing something in the past includes the past form of an auxiliary verb plus the perfect form of a verb.

For "wish - " and "as if - " sentences, we can present the following two types and let the learners choose one, regardless of the tense of the main verb (past, present, or future).

(B)-1: The past form of a verb (or an auxiliary verb) is used for a real-time event.

(B)-2: The past perfect form of a verb is used for a preceding event.

##### 4.3 Agreement of tense not always applied

As the forms in (B)-1 and 2 do not depend on the tense of the main verb, the rule of agreement of tenses in the indicative mood is not applied here. We can explain that it is due to part of the nature of tense form control, which allows using "wrong" tense forms.

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**Appendix.** MEXT-censored Textbooks Checked (In the order of MEXT announcement)

English Communication I (The same titles of Communication English II in 2013)

清田洋一 (ほか)：『All Aboard! Communication English I』 東京：東京書籍. 2012.

浅見道明 (ほか)：『Power On Communication I』 東京：東京書籍. 2012.

田辺正美 (ほか)：『PROMINENCE Communication English I』 東京：東京書籍. 2012.

松林世志子 (ほか)：『ENGLISH NOW I』 東京：開隆堂. 2012.

生井健一 (ほか)：『Discovery English I』 東京：開隆堂. 2012.

霜崎實 (ほか)：『CROWN English Communication I』 東京：三省堂. 2012.

森住衛 (ほか)：『MY WAY English Communication I』 東京：三省堂. 2012.

金子朝子 (ほか)：『VISTA English Communication I』 東京：三省堂. 2012.

伊 東 治 己 (ほか)：『New ONE WORLD English Communication I』 東京：教育出版. 2012.

八代京子 (ほか)：『On Air English Communication I』 東京：開拓社. 2012.

岡田圭子 (ほか)：『Compass English Communication I』 東京：大修館. 2012.

村野井仁 (ほか)：『Genius English Communication I』 東京：大修館. 2012.

卯城祐司 (ほか)：『ELEMENT English Communication I』 東京：啓林館. 2012.

竹内理 (ほか)：『LANDMARK English Communication I』 東京：啓林館. 2012.

松坂ヒロシ (ほか)：『POLESTAR English Communication I』

東京：数研出版. 2012.

畠山利一 (ほか)：『BIG DIPPER English Communication I』 東京：数研出版. 2012.

西光義弘 (ほか)：『COMET English Communication I』 東京：数研出版. 2012.

市川泰男 (ほか)：『UNICORN English Communication I』 東京：文英堂. 2012.

倉持二郎 (ほか)：『Grove English Communication I』 東京：文英堂. 2012.

鈴木寿一 (ほか)：『MAINSTREAM English Communication I』 東京：増進堂. 2012.

鈴木寿一 (ほか)：『NEW STREAM English Communication I』 東京：増進堂. 2012.

野村和宏 (ほか)：『Perspective English Communication I』 東京：第一学習社. 2012.

築道和明 (ほか)：『Vivid English Communication I』 東京：第一学習社. 2012.

田中茂範 (ほか)：『PRO-VISION English Communication I』 東京：桐原書店. 2012.

望月正道 (ほか)：『WORLD TREK English Communication I』 東京：桐原書店. 2012.